Hill Cantons

Monday, August 15, 2011

No Borders: A Conversation With Rob Kuntz

To call the following piece an "interview" is a bit inadequate.

What follows below is more of a "cease-fire agreement": a stopping point in a long zig-zagging conversation with Rob Kuntz that stretched over many months. A conversation that was never "easy" in the conventional sense—though my interviewee acted as a class act throughout—for there wasn't a moment in the rapid fire of each faltering, scratchy Skype phone call that I didn't feel challenged to re-think assumptions about the evolution of our hobby.

Simply writing out the standard dry intro also seems to fall short; to only say spit out the list of professional credits, terse wiki-like biographical lines and perhaps a few fawning superlatives just doesn't seem right. Rob is not an easy person to pin down or pigeon hole in convenient terms both professionally and personally.

For sure Rob was one of the pathbreakers in the creative gaming ferment of the late 60s and 70s that culminated with D&D and the birth of the modern role-playing game. As a virtual member of the Gygax family in Lake Geneva, he almost literally grew up with the game. He went from being an early play-tester as a teen in the early 70s to a co-DM with Gary Gygax to a writer/editor with TSR—and then off to the rough and tumble of decades of freelance game design and writing. Fight On! magazine will be dedicating issue 14 to that career.

But better to hear it all from the man himself, so with no further ado…

Hill Cantons: *Who is Rob Kuntz?*

Rob Kuntz: Just like that? Poof?!

When I quit TSR for philosophical and personal reasons, both related to a changed atmosphere at the company, I closed myself out for the most part. But I kept a watchful eye on things as they changed; and I was always in contact with my peers.

The rest of my life is as a free-lance writer. Except for a handful of articles done for Dragon Magazine BitD, all that I've written has been free-lance. You could say that I

Gaming Stuff I Wrote

- By This Axe: Battle Rules (PDF)
- By This Axe: Battle Rules (Print)
- Tree Maze of the Twisted Druid
- Hill Cantons Compendium (Free PDF)
- Pulp Fantasy Nation Generator
- LotFP Random Starting Equipment
- Basic Fantasy Quick Character Generator

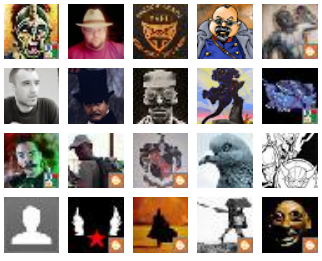
Pages

- Maps

Followers

Join this site
with Google Friend Connect

Members (455) More »



Already a member? Sign in

+1 707

Blog Archive

did justice to old 'Blue Eye's' song since, "I did it my way." When you go that route there's always a price to pay. On the positive side this reinforced my ultimate purpose and I strove harder to master the craft of writing in various forms. I realized through all the highs and lows that you succeed in something that you value only through sacrifice. There's been a good measure of that in my adventuresome career, for which I am grateful, of course.

For the curious, or for those easily amused, here are some other "highlights" from my life…

…At 8 years of age I was reading the Harvard Classics and a set of Collier encyclopedias my far-sighted mother had purchased for my brother and I; and I was seeking access to the reserved books at the Lake Geneva Public Library, with many raised eyebrows from the librarians forthcoming in exchange…

…My father died in a head-on car crash when I was age 2; never knew him…

…Gary Gygax once referred to my memory as "phenomenal." I still maintain a single memory from being in my highchair, age 1 or less, this based upon my brother's size in the images…

…At age 13 my mother suffered a nervous breakdown and that left me alone while being watched over by the neighbors. While flipping through a Playboy of theirs I discovered an advertisement for the Dog Fight board game by MB in the X-mas gift section. I petitioned my aunt who was checking in on me weekly to buy it. The hunt for it introduced me to AH games, as Larry Zirk, an assistant store-manager at Shultz Bro.'s 5&10 that stocked some AH titles, informed me of these and that some locals played them at Gary Gygax's house.

Rob playing *Little Wars* at the 1968 IFW Convention.

A week later I accepted his invite to play at EGG's house on Center Street. This started my association with the Gygax family and was also my introduction to miniature- and board-wargaming in 1968…

…I have been the ward of the State of Wisconsin due to my mother's mental health issues and was in two foster homes; and at age 16 the Gygax family suggested adopting me (as we were that close) since they were bound for Maine (Guidon Games was going to hire Gary full time), but the deal with Guidon fell through at the last moment and we remained in LG…

…I have worked jobs to keep me going so I could write. I have owned and operated two small businesses, have been a business manager, a marketing director and a top salesman for a national company whereat I landed the Saturn (GM) account. I have also flipped burgers, washed dishes and dug holes…

► 2014 (30)

► 2013 (75)

► 2012 (142)

▼ 2011 (278)

► December (18)

► November (20)

► October (17)

► September (24)

▼ August (24)

New Google+ Hub for Petal Throne Gaming

Mission Accomplished

Field Notes from the Google+ Nexus Point Under Jak...

Let the Games Begin

GM Challenge Compilation: Kindle Editon

Now Playing at a Free Download Near You: The GM Ch...

Last Call on the GM Challenge PDF

Portrait of a Total Party Killer

GM Challenge Update

Time for Your Gold Stars

Building a Better GM: A Challenge

The Champion of Zed

South Texas Mini-Con this Saturday

Q&A Time with Rob Kuntz

No Borders: A Conversation With Rob Kuntz

Revving Up a Petal Throne Mini-Boom on Google Plus...

South Texas Mini-Con August 20: Details

…I was married once, but the empty vodka bottles thrown at me (pre-emptied by my ex) speedily guided me to a divorce…

...I have hitchhiked over 1,000 miles, my longest trek being from northern Minnesota to southern Wisconsin…

…I have traveled extensively in Mexico, Guatemala and Western Africa, the last whereat I contracted malaria and where I had what I can only term as a "riveting" spiritual experience which I cannot "rationally" explain to this day…

…I miss nothing in my observations of life, even noting the cracks in sidewalks and their varying widths, depths and forms… The small, or what might be considered by others, insignificant, things of life have always maintained my attention in the grand sweep of things…

…I seem to instantly attract eccentric, mad or nearly insane people. My stories are endless involving these and would make for a full book in their own right. Some of my friends have joked about these circumstances, noting that you could put me in a coliseum of 60,000 souls, for instance, blindfold me, spin me about and then have me point at a random person in the crowd, and yep, It'd be the loony…

...I have lived in Wisconsin, Florida, Arizona (Tucson and the Grand Canyon, the latter whereat I was employed for 1½ years), Virginia and North Carolina… While employed at the Grand Canyon my "office" where I wrote my novella, "Black Festival," was located in a very small, walk-in closet…

…Those close to me who have either heard of or experienced firsthand my crazy life stories have said that I've lived two lives and are convinced that some luck or greater charm was in force to get me through my many episodes relatively unscathed...

…I spent many years mastering different writing forms while working dead-end jobs to do so. I have a novel, 12 shorts, a novella and a screenplay plus tons of partials from that time, mostly from my four years spent in Arizona. Close friends have read them and think that they are great examples of different styles. I wrote to see if I could do it. It was practice and if they are published before I die, well, OK. Publishing what I write is not high on my list in every case, anyway, even if such matter twinkles with supposed gold. People might be perplexed by this attitude, though some artists might grasp the notion…

…I once held a shotgun to a person's head and almost pulled the trigger over one-grand he'd stolen from me; getting the best of my rage I instead dropped the matter and went to a secluded country area and blew apart a fallen tree branch to unleash my angst. Yep, crazy days, I've lived them…

…Oh. I never get bored…

…I believe that nihilists should just commit suicide and be done with it… That is if they could find no worth in doing so…

…I don't follow crowds…

The Missing EPT Underworld Chart

A Jakallan Underworld of My Own

Borderlands Draft Done, But Wait There's More...

Getting Your Petal Throne Game On

ACKS Gaining Momentum

Will the Game of Thrones Fad Give Fantasy Gaming a...

Dave Arneson's Gypsy Sayings

► July (31)

► June (21)

► May (18)

► April (21)

► March (34)

► February (26)

► January (24)

► 2010 (77)

► 2009 (29)

Fellow Travellers

Dangerous Brian: A Gamers Blog
Silence Voices: Session One Handouts
12 minutes ago

Gothridge Manor
Getting Ready for Origins
1 hour ago

Dreams in the Lich House

You Had Me At "Bounded Accuracy"
1 hour ago

Age of Ravens
Crux: Urban Fantasy Campaign Seed (Part Four

…Several years ago I asked myself this question: "Am I living in the future tense of a past present?" Don't worry, I'm getting to the answer, I'm getting to the answer, I'm…

…I love plants, animals and seclusion… And children, the flowers of the Earth, constantly challenged by a seemingly oblivious society…

…I hate loud noises; all of my senses have been remarkably acute since childhood…

…I (secretly) dislike giving autographs since I've reasoned (perhaps erringly) that the petition-to-act contains something akin to "worship," which I despise. I give them anyway, and with a smile while siding on the 100% appreciated level at those times…

…I believe without question that creativity in the U.S. has been on the decline since the late 1970's. I've been gathering material on this subject for many years and am outlining a book on it. I hope to out race the collective now forming in uncreative publishing so that it might have some chance in the future of actually being "understood" by first readers…

…An interviewer once titled me the "Maverick of Dungeons & Dragons"…

… And… I have immensely enjoyed throwing myself into my life experiences no matter how "good," bad," "crazy," or "sad" they turned out.

Next Question…

RIGHT
(From left to right) Fritz Leiber, Gary Gygax, M. A. R. Barker, Ian Livingstone, Robert Kuntz, and (foreground) Steve Jackson. Photo © 1976 Ian Livingstone

HC: *You are of the opinion that D&D went astray from its initial goals. What went wrong?*

RJK: The original game as envisioned saw the province of personalized creation on all levels as the only dominant purpose of the game as first play-tested, written, and promoted in commercial form.

True historians of the game—there are many pseudo-historians promoting their version, primarily as guess work—note very clearly that the products published in the immediate wake of D&D were supportive of this view as embodied in the authors' philosophy, such as Dungeon Geomorphs, Outdoor Geomorphs, Monster & Treasure Assortments, Player- and Non-Player character record sheets, graph paper and hex paper assortments, and the promotion of a unifying periodical, *The Strategic Review*, wherein continued additions and refinements, such as optional/variant rules for the game, could see purchase just as they had done in the original Supplements to D&D.

The philosophy/intent is clear as a clear sky at this point.

G)
1 hour ago

FATE SF

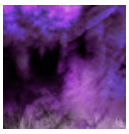
The Saguaro
1 hour ago

Swords & Stitchery - Old Time Sewing & Table Top Rpg Blog
Free Science Fiction Classic Comic Book - Tom Corbett Space Cadet #378 From Dell Comics For Your Old School Space Opera Campaign
4 hours ago

The Happy Whisk

Bottom Teeth & Toenail
4 hours ago

Aeons & Augauries
Sci-fi gaming is hard
4 hours ago

Hereticwerks

Purple Clouds in Wermspittle
4 hours ago

A Paladin In Citadel

Valley Counters For Magic Realm
12 hours ago

Show All

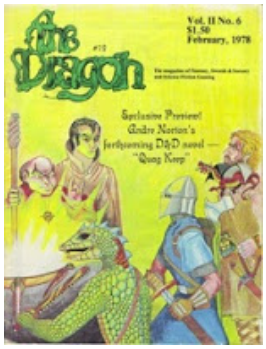
The Monthly Top Ten

Alternative D&D Next Covers Released

Barbaric Texas

The actual philosophical change occurs when someone, I forget whom, sent Gary Gygax a copy of a pre-made adventure, *Palace of the Vampire Queen*. Many of us looked at it—I even picked up a copy for myself-- in a mode of perplexed inquiry. The majority of us were vocal about why anyone would want someone else creating things for them and their campaign worlds whereas all of the resources in primary and supportive categories were available to them to create their own material.

I'll add a little context.



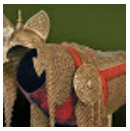
TSR was not given over to the idea of *Dungeons & Dragons* as other than another game then, which indeed supports their stated philosophy, and this is noted specifically in the many and varied types of games that their catalogs previewed for sale, which included those titles as I've noted and a wide variety of board games and miniature rules. TSR's intent had been from the onset to be a game publisher, and D&D was but one of its many titles, then.

With the advent and adoption of the concept of pre-made adventures the whole back-end "support" mechanism took upon a new meaning and form and one, by comparison, that flew in the face of TSR's original vision for its role-playing game. Whereas there was at that point a solid corps of DMs creating their games from the ground up and doing so with great gusto, TSR succumbed to an opposite path of doing the "creating" for them with such adventures.

This had two immediate effects: It created two polarized camps of consumers for the existing, and soon to be changed, product line (I now refer to these as the "dissenting creatives" and the "eager dependents"); and as the move to AD&D with its codification of rules took shape (in part for legal reasons due to its lawsuit with Arneson, in part for IP reasons real or imagined, and in large part due to a changed philosophy which would require absolute/immutable mechanics to be adhered to in order to sell consistently packaged and designed adventures and to promote these via conventions and the RPGA), the split reached its head with the promotion and marketing of the remade philosophy.

The emphasis on supporting the game in its titular and original form vanished. This move to a mass-market consumer model perforce "dumbed down" the game as TSR attempted to get onto retail shelves worldwide. This happened in the face of all original veterans of the philosophy one-by-one leaving the company (other than EGG) and being replaced by a second wave of designers (1978 forward) to accomplish its market goals as then outlined and re-envisioned.

From this point forward we see the promotion of a flagship line of AD&D products "For Your Imagination," a consistent promotion of Basic D&D specifically aimed at the mass market and the abandonment, wholesale, of the original RP-Creative vision, and by such marketing dynamics, an equal abandonment of the idea of TSR as a diverse game publisher. This transition happened so fast and during a time when most customers were still mesmerized by the game's potential that it went smoothly and was only seen and sensed in afterthought; and the newest body of consumers that this groomed were certainly not, at first, among the list of those screaming "counterfeit.'


Hill Cantons Bestiary: The War-Ocelot

North Texas RPG Con After Action Report

Contest Deadline and Holmesian Scroll Creation

Tree Maze of the Twisted Druid For Free, Yo

How to "Awesome Up" Fantasy Maps

All That is Solid Melts Into Air

Pompeii as Model Undercity or Ruins

The Unbearable Dullness of DnD Wilderness

About Me

Chris Kutalik

Follow 1.6k

View my complete profile

Other sites of interest

This 2nd retconned marketing model continued to this very day and as a template for every major version of the game and, by comparison, has been emulated by many other companies then and now, including those fan-driven publishers currently publishing under the OGL. Take a close look. The majority of companies release their RPG rules and then what? Adventures. Scads of them.

Thus the ongoing perception of D&D-RPG (past, present and future) is rooted in this predominant formula; but this is the antithesis of the original RP philosophy as honestly promoted before money, marketing and a formulaic approach won out and regulated D&D's 100% creative form to a dismissed and diminishing minority who had been eager adherents in creating their own material and in supporting TSR's original vision.

HC: *How has this change influenced your own perceptions of design?*

RJK: At the time it had no effect, as I was not inclined to publish an adventure. I have always thought that the DM's route to any fantastic achievement in such literature was through a very personal course, most certainly inspired by reading and study or other such related matter, but not actually "implanted" or done for them. I see it as would an engineer who designs, tests and then builds a car.

There is great worth in all of its many stages and definitely in the end result and it is all yours. Any alternate course offers no equal worth. By comparison, one might buy the car, as they do the adventure, and make it theirs with a little tinkering here or there (as with a car, by adding dual exhausts, chrome, etc.), but that's not pure creation and the value added experience in this case is negated.

My first opportunity to design something specifically outside of dungeon adventures crafted for our gamers is when EGG needed assistance designing *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* for Origins II; and I contrived the majority of the new encounters, monsters, tech and such for it.

The next was, again at his encouragement, to produce what he and I referred to as the "Iron Golem Adventure," that is, WG5. I thought some time about this and agreed, though I had been on a different design path with several board games. I liked its non-linear beginning, as I had noted that many adventures were being designed A+ B + C, an ancient and unfortunately overused structure that I unlearned by reading a lot of fiction (and not always fantasy/sf genre fiction).

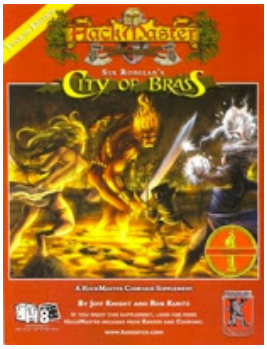
The other thing I noted is that many of these adventures were just using old tropes and monsters, some in good ways, such as by placement or in concert with other encounters (thus tactical), but still many of these were rather dull. So, as with the Greyhawk and Kalibruhn adventures, my main point was to convey newness and that to me meant strange.

This mode is best exemplified in my previous works *Garden of the Plantmaster, City of Brass*, and in the majority of the *Maze of Zayene* series, *Dark Druids*, etc. So, I bought into the adventure crafting model if it broke and continued to break my established past creations. It's a chore; and it seems that it takes longer and longer to conceptualize such elusive matter let alone pen it, but I do so.

- Blue Room Archive
- Encounter magazine
- Medieval Demographics
- Museum of Roleplaying Games
- North Texas RPG Con
- OD&D discussion
- OSR Links to Wisdom
- The Comeback Inn
- The Miniatures Page

sitemeter

LinkWithin



The Machine Level, now being crafted, is 100% all new material as realized from what I had in notation form and as built upon from there. That includes inhabitants, environments, all of what the adventurers will experience. In my estimation if designers are not aiming at this sort of creative level then they are either lazy or just want to publish to see their name on a book, none of which will survive for long as such matter will certainly not be thought of over-fondly in any case.

In summary, I am of the Hitchcockian School of fiction. Story to him was basically life with all the dull moments stripped out; and in my estimation that is best accomplished in adventure design by maintaining suspense, and one of the best ways to accomplish that is by maintaining a very high degree of player unfamiliarity with introduced RPG environments and their elements.

Thus my philosophical quandary was resolved by adhering to a design-path that will ultimately end when I see no more creative expansion within it. While adhering to this notion I have always hoped to inspire others to emulate a truly creative and mixed path that will in turn expose new possibilities in design for both DMs and aspiring designers. Unfortunately, and on the main over the years, I have instead seen raw regurgitation sold as "New" designs; and forget the improved.

Critical? Quite so.

Not all RPG adventure designs can be categorized as such; but it is also interesting in my experience that much of the new and improved material is more often overlooked, marginalized, ill understood or just outright ignored—and here I mean by "informed" reviewers or critics, or by folks with ill-conceived or biased opinions. The latter cases relate directly to the divisions that have existed in this industry for years. By comparison, and indirectly yet more importantly, this also points to what individual companies and their employed or free-lance designers vest in with each other by relation. By extension this also relates to my theory on "Hot Dogs" as you have inquired about, below.

HC: *Why do you feel that the phrase 'Golden Age' is misleading when applied to the D&D game at any given time in its history?*

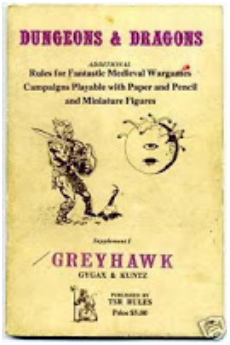
RJK: It's quite a silly affirmation, isn't it?

How can we assume that in a creative medium of any sort that we've reached a pinnacle within it? It's like an artist confirming that they've done their best work and that there are no more hurdles and challenges for them. Ask a true artist if that is the case with them and they will answer more often in the negative.

Secondly, and perhaps of equal import, is the fact that OD&D as a creative medium for its participants implied no such limits; it is only when, as I noted above, TSR's philosophy changed to a mass market consumer model and drew in an ever expanding costumer base (however short-lived as a model, and I refer to it as the "Three Year In and Out") which vested in their pre-made adventures did we get a dose of this, and this later on as those folks from that marketing era (the "eager dependants") returned to the game for nostalgia reasons. But ask the "dissenting creatives" when that heyday was and

the majority would emphatically state that it existed when the creativity was all theirs, that is, when TSR sold them on the idea of the OD&D game with its openly creative license to "do" and to "be".

HC: *What's so vital and important about Gary Gygax's afterword in Volume 3 of the original game?*



RJK: I have no doubt as written that it was the unadulterated truth. His partial, "why have us do any more of your imagining for you?" should strike a deep chord or two in anyone so inclined to understand the import of that statement. This could have been alternately expressed as, "why have us do ALL of your imagining for you?" with no loss or change of meaning. The very soul of the game is embodied in that statement; and it's right there for all to observe and to ponder over.

But believe my next words: it was to be hidden away and ignored, and therein resides a great pity. What is so vital now, in retrospect, are the "whats" that were effected by this curtailment, with the largest "what" being what might have been for countless would be creators had that ideal found its greatest expression and continued to date?

HC: *What effect did mass marketing have on the game?*

RJK: On the main it castrated D&D's greater glory, regulating it to just another entertainment vehicle. Today it's just another choice among hundreds of such diversions.

HC: *How does this relate to pre-published adventures and why did they become such a pillar of TSR's business plan?*

RJK: The game in all forms begs content; at first the prescription was for creators to manage that need on their own; then that changed, as I've noted, to pre-made adventures which "coincidentally" occurred with a push into new and expanding markets and the marked codification of the rules to a set-in-stone understood.

In truth this was a deliberate path taken to grow company markets and revenues. The mainstay of that plan—adventures—was adopted as a model for both TSR and the RPGA. "This is the way to do it," could have easily been their slogan, then; and the majority of TSR's customers followed, not wanting to be excluded. But this also had immediate negative results, as it dismissed the holistic aspects of the game and the creative (and vocal) minority who had supported it from the onset.

HC: *What role did the three-year "in and out" marketing strategy of TSR and now WOTC play in undermining the game?*

RJK: It has to do with fluctuating markets and when to position new market pushes within these to offset declining consumer purchases. Usually this amounts to starting a new market/sales push just as the last one is beginning to level off. The idea behind this is totally short term and runs the risk of negative bottom lines if there is lack of interest in an under-performing product line, if such products are being successfully challenged from serious competitors, and if there have been real consumer shifts in interest as measured by many factors, the main one being purchases.

All of these negative market factors existed with TSR, late 1980's onward. Speaking with several ex-TSR employees, EGG included, confirmed my thoughts on this. The base age range for the majority of consumers had been on the decline by the late 80's, and though I cannot state the range exactly, my best guess based upon the inputs is 13-16 years of age.

The idea was to replace those lost through shifting interests and spending habits (a very volatile age range for that) with new waves gliding in behind the departures, thus maintaining a status quo. As noted, this is a short term and iffy way to maintain markets; and even with flagship sales leaders like FR and DL, TSR bit the bullet with this.

In 1988 TSR doubled their production and slashed retail prices 20% to pump up the tired market they had created. Saturation is always the last (and often, desperate) recourse to plug the bleeding hole of declining sales. In reality what TSR lacked was quality product (though *Dark Sun* was one of the exceptions, too little or too late, unfortunately). What WotC does today is unknown to me, though they have in the past maintained quite a long list of products; and I do not know their consumer median age range, though I suspect it is on the younger side as it was with TSR.

HC: *What's the hot dog vendor approach?*

RJK: This also has to do with saturation. It happened during the d20 phase of D&D; prior to that, with TSR's 2E splat-book phase, and can happen anywhere where the idea is to drive competitors out of a market that is dominated by a big publisher or by one that produces tons of products. As the award-winning author, Robert McKee, has stated, "90 % of what is written isn't published" (i.e., because it's crap; and he also makes the same assertion for all other artistic mediums). But his words don't really apply to the RPG industry that is controlled for the most part by one company AND, that across the board, has no concrete standards of professional product review.

In an industry primarily dominated by one company that has no real competition, there is a high probability to get (as was the case with the latter-day TSR) mediocre, templated, slap-a-pretty-cover-on-it-and-get-it-out-the-door type of products. I call them "hot dogs": easily made, served at mass functions. This leaves those designers with really good designs waiting in the wings with thumbs up their collective asses.

Why?

As the main courses being served again and again are hot dogs a publisher vested in that route doesn't want to change the menu that is working for them until it stops working, which directly relates to a-nickel-up-your-ass-at-a-time planned obsolescence. So a really good designer (offering steak, let's say) is really up against it. Most everyone is used to seeing, smelling and eating hot dogs and thus cannot sense the steak vendor, and even if they did, they can't "get" what it is they're offering.

Because? IT AIN'T A HOT DOG… There's a lot more that dovetails into this, of course, and here I only expose the most evident component of "grooming a market."

HC: *Tell me a little about Kalibruhn. What was this imagined as?*

RJK: It's my World. It went through two design phases and I settled on the second.

Both are top-down creations, but the first was, in my latter estimation, less realized than the second; but that's not to say that the first had no detail, quite the contrary. It just worked out that it was a proving ground for designing the even more immersive second. I had a distant intention at first to see parts of it published, but I abandoned that route and have no desire at all to see it in published form. There's not much more to tell unless I go into the details and that isn't happening in this interview (smiles).

HC: *How do we have a more honest and provocative discussion about the older editions of D&D (and our gaming history)?*

RJK: A very broad question with many avenues left open for answer, so I'll choose one. Finding what is common in all of the editions would be a starting point. Let's see: editions, worlds, products. These are all passing ideas. The immutable survives these as the intrinsic core of the game. And the immutable part of this game in all its forms is the ability to create on all levels. By honestly seeking its core principle that remains unchanged even as the landscape it functions therein changes time and time again, this where we find its truth, its essence, if you will. The rest of it is just dressing it out as each one of us prefers.

HC: *What do you find confounding with the current level of discussion on the Internet?*

RJK: I do not participate in confounding discussions, so I don't have an inside on this. I do get irritated by the pseudo-history of D&D being promulgated as fact. Then there are the many erroneous Wiki articles on various related subjects. There's misinformation strewn over all types of fora, but recanting these fallacies would necessitate having ample time to do so. I just don't have the time or the inclination to do that.

Some folks from the Acaeum, such as David Witts and Allan Grohe, are better positioned to keep an eye on such things and they do what they can to eradicate such failures in scholarship; and I lend time to answer their questions to further enhance their already mature knowledge base so they can do so without complication.

HC: *Let's talk about your blog post "Taking D&D Back..."? What were you getting at with that? What were the pieces that went into the D&D stew? Why have those pieces been obscured over time? How do we get them back and how do we blend in new ones?*

RJK: Is that all you wish to know (winks)?? Heh.

You ask me to describe the beginning, middle and future of the game. Indeed the post was explicit, deriving from my experiences and thoughts since the early 70's onward. What more can I add? It was explicit: D&D derives from all imaginative literature and sources, not just S&S. Swords and Sorcery is a latter day addition to the whole field of speculative literature, anyway. I'm not taking anything away from Fritz Leiber who introduced the phrase, nor from those more modern day authors who have mined its terrain for the many fine stories we've seen. Our play tests certainly had many elements from this genre attached to them; but our imaginations were not exclusionary.

Taking back a thing presumes that it was lost to begin with. If there is obfuscation going on, it probably starts with the idea that this is a S&S game. "This game is strictly Fantasy," is one of EGG's most telling quotes from OD&D. So, I am not convinced that people are lost to these imaginative threads so much as siding with where their imaginations lead. Ours, BitD, led everywhere, there were no limits, no borders, for how could there be? It was Fantasy.

The game as published actually made mention of going to Mars as part of the world-building suggestions; and as I have noted, that indeed transpired in our campaign. Also, ERB's books were the very first ones EGG recommended I read from his shelves. Not Conan, not Elric, not Kyrik. Greyhawk, and my own Kalibruhn, actually contain more Swords & Planet than the average "fantasy" campaign that you'd experience today.

My first iteration of Kalibruhn, for instance, contains a stranded alien race known as the Whools (see picture right) which makes for some interesting drama, myth and story-adventure avenues as they seek exit from the planet while at the same time, being a very war-like race, attempting to control parts of it.

So I strongly believe that this relates less to regaining something that has been lost but in using what you have, which is imagination. And if people prefer to channel that along paths filled with S&S, then that's their choice. But anything is possible in "Fantasy" D&D.

HC: *What are you working on these days?*

RJK: Immediately? Very little.

I'm just coming back up to speed and health from a very challenging 2010. My SO's mother unexpectedly passed away, we moved right after that, I suffered a minor heart attack while moving, I came back from NTRPGCON 2 (2010) and suffered what we figured to be the swine flu and after recovering from that then proceeded to tear the rotator in my left arm (which has finally healed after many months).

All of this wore me down to a point where I actually feel older. I had a fine discussion with Allan Grohe at NTRPGCON 3 about future projects, including the Machine Level, and he has been aware of my health trials and recovery. NTX wore me out, though, and it wasn't until now that I had energy enough to finish this interview. I'm starting to feel progressively more energetic, but my health comes first, of course, so projects will proceed as I rise to the occasion of confronting them again.

HC: *Why is dissembling the ultimate art of the GM? Why is tone and presentation so important? Why do you lose such a vital level to RPGs when they aren't face-to-face? How do you build tension, uncertainty, and mystery? What are the tricks?*

RJK: Let's add some starch to the first question to "straighten it out". I did not state in our phone conversation that dissembling is the ultimate art of the GM. That would be suggestive of a structure for every one of them; and GMs find their strengths in different

ways. I will say that mastering story-telling with all of its nuances can only strengthen the route a GM takes in his or her adventure-crafting; and here I refer to the art of mastering the elements of story, including those you have named and others, and knowing intuitively when to use these particles to promote the ongoing adventure. Dissembling is but one element at the disposal of a crafty GM.

If you want to gauge the extent to which you have mastered story try winging an entire adventure as EGG and I did countless times (and as I instructed the participants to do in my workshop at this past NTRPGCON). Scripting an adventure and running it thereafter is not as telling in promoting such improvisational story matter; it's only when you're at the crossroads of doubt and choice, this is where you'll find whether you are a true "story-crafter" or a mere "story-repeater".

So there are no tricks, no shortcuts. You either master story--and thereafter know how, when and why to insert its elements into the forming adventure--or you don't.

RJK Text Copyright 2011, Robert J. Kuntz. Permission to quote its parts must be secured from the author. Parts of this interview have been contextualized from two forthcoming works of non-fiction, including RJK's Memoirs.

You might also like:

The Champion of Zed

Beyond the Weird: an Interview with Trey Causey

What Are We Escaping From?

Linkwithin

Posted by Chris Kutalik at 10:16 AM

Labels: interview series

Print Friendly

18 comments:

Trey August 15, 2011 at 11:19 AM

"Ours, BitD, led everywhere, there were no limits, no borders, for how could there be? It was Fantasy."

Yeah. :)

Reply

Dangerous Brian August 15, 2011 at 11:43 AM

Thanks for sharing. That was a very enlightening read.

Reply

Victor Raymond August 15, 2011 at 11:47 AM

"His partial, "why have us do any more of your imagining for you?" should strike a deep chord or two in anyone so inclined to understand the import of that statement. This could have been alternately expressed as, "why have us do ALL of your imagining for you?" with no loss or change of meaning. The very soul of the game is embodied in that statement; and it's right there for all to observe and to ponder over."

Quite so. I find myself re-reading his words as a reminder to reach for my own creativity.

Reply

Kent August 15, 2011 at 11:55 AM

1. eh.

2. Very interesting.

Reply

Porky August 15, 2011 at 12:03 PM

Thanks from me too. I enjoyed that very much.

Reply

DHBoggs August 15, 2011 at 1:02 PM

Great interview and great to know Rob's health is improving.

Wish there was a way to make this required reading for all tabletop RPG gamers.

Reply

Evan August 15, 2011 at 2:20 PM

Wow, what a great interview!

Reading it has really made me think about what I'm doing with my own campaign. I'd like to think the reason that it's Medieval Fantasy is that I like the middle ages and horror movies and did before I found D&D, but it does make me question whether or not I really imagined it to it's fullest extent.

I don't really think ERB's John Carter stuff is that far from S&S. And certainly some of the DIY people from the OSR have taken a lot of disparate influences and ran with them. At the end of the day though what Rob is talking about makes complete sense.

Reply

Anathematician August 15, 2011 at 3:26 PM

Thanks for your time and effort. I walked away far more informed, and armed with a different perspective on the birth of D&D and the path it followed over time.

Reply

fluerdemal August 15, 2011 at 5:50 PM

This is great interview, thanks for sharing.

D.

Reply

iron August 15, 2011 at 9:10 PM

Interesting read. Looking at that picture of Gygax, Leiber, Barker and the rest is top notch, yet I can't help but be reminded that If there's (another) major fault the Hobby was not getting writers of such caliber as Leiber to contribute more to it. TSR in it's heyday was loaded with cash and could of easily hired him. A module co-written by Fritz Leiber and Gary Gygax would of been nothing short then awesome.

Reply

Alexis August 15, 2011 at 11:08 PM

I can think of three posts I could write about this.

Call me a Dissenting Creative.

Reply

Desert Scribe August 18, 2011 at 10:43 PM

Congrats on scoring this interview/conversation. It's caused quite a few ripples in this little corner of the blogosphere.

Reply

William Huber August 19, 2011 at 12:37 PM

This is absolutely brilliant. Dissenting creatives / eager dependents: it is, in some ways, a critique of what fan culture has become.

Reply

The Dave August 20, 2011 at 11:58 PM

An amazing interview with Rob!! When I first began to play AD&D we were far from rich, we had a few of the core books we pooled our money

to buy and one set of dice we all shared. I guess it forced us to be dissenting creatives and for that I am glad.

Reply

Lord of the Green Dragons August 21, 2011 at 12:41 PM

@ the Dave.

A heartening story for many reasons; it contains parts similar to that of the Bronte children. Isn't nice to know that you are now included, if only in part, in such esteemed company? :)

Cheers!

Reply

Lord of the Green Dragons August 21, 2011 at 12:47 PM

@William Huber.

If you are interested in similar takes on culture/art, research the art critic/culture critic Dave Hickey. Especially noteworthy is a talk and follow-up Q/A he did for the Smithsonian, somewhere floating about the net in various video forms.

Reply

Basso August 24, 2011 at 9:35 AM

Great interview. I've always figured that usage of pre-designed adventures was bad for the creative mind as well, and am glad to see that the creators of the game feel/felt that way as well.

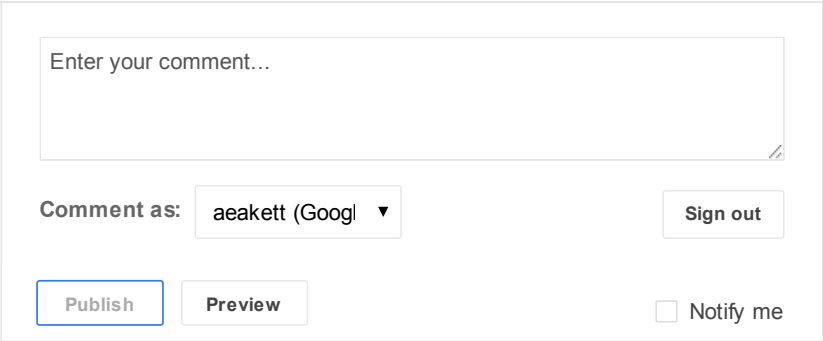
Reply

Gort's Friend August 12, 2013 at 4:11 PM

Just stumbled across this. Thanks, it reassures my thinking on a lot of issues.

There were years where I played D&D precisely because it cost almost nothing to play and there have been a couple of decades where I haven't bought any products.

Reply



Links to this post

Create a Link

Newer Post Home Older Post

Subscribe to: Post Comments (Atom)

Travel template. Powered by Blogger.